

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Log H-331

ISSUED: March 31, 1982

Forwarded to:

Honorable Richard L. Thornburgh  
Governor of Pennsylvania  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-82-4

On January 2, 1982, in Southampton, Pennsylvania, a single-unit Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) commuter train struck an Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) tractor/cargo tank semitrailer loaded with 7,900 gallons of gasoline at a railroad/highway grade crossing. The gasoline was released upon impact and fire engulfed the front of the train, the truck, and a nearby occupied passenger vehicle. The motorman died several weeks later, and six persons suffered minor injuries. Damage was estimated to be about \$500,000.

In the first 13 days of January 1982, SEPTA commuter trains were involved in three highway grade crossing accidents which resulted in three fatalities. In recent years, the number of fatalities at public grade crossings in Pennsylvania, as reported to the Federal Railroad Administration, has increased from 7 in 1979, to 9 in 1980, and to 10 in the first 10 months of 1981. Meanwhile, the number of fatalities at grade crossings has been reduced steadily at the national level.

To reduce the number of accidents involving collisions of trains and highway vehicles at grade crossings, a uniform, coordinated effort is needed. The education, enforcement, engineering, and legislative effort that is required involves interaction among agencies that may ordinarily not become involved in each other's activities. Trucking associations, State and local departments of transportation, labor groups, enforcement agencies, legislatures, railroads, highway carriers, and shippers should participate in this effort. Many of these agencies are already working together in State "Operation Lifesaver" programs which are being coordinated by the National Safety Council (NSC). In a recent special study, <sup>1/</sup> the National Transportation Safety Board asked the NSC to expand the existing Operation Lifesaver program to include a specific program that addresses preventing accidents involving trucks carrying bulk hazardous materials, especially petroleum products, over grade crossings. The NSC has responded favorably and plans to expand into this critical area as soon as it is organizationally feasible. Similarly, the American Petroleum Institute, the American Trucking Associations, Inc., the National Tank Truck Carriers, Inc., the Association of American Railroads, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers have initiated activity in these areas.

<sup>1/</sup> For more detailed information, read Special Study—"Railroad/Highway Grade Crossing Accidents Involving Trucks Transporting Bulk Hazardous Materials" (NTSB-HZM-81-2).

At the conclusion of the study, the Safety Board asked all States, including Pennsylvania, to participate in this hazardous materials program as part of "Operation Lifesaver." However, since Pennsylvania is one of 20 States that does not participate in the "Operation Lifesaver" program, a limited program for grade crossing accidents involving hazardous materials might be difficult to implement. Pennsylvania's participation in the voluntary "Operation Lifesaver" program would increase safety for highway and railroad users throughout the State while providing a broad base from which to attack the hazardous materials truck/train collision problem. In locations where this type of program has been implemented, the results have been impressive and encouraging in terms of reduced accidents, fatalities, and injuries at crossings. 2/

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:

Adopt an "Operation Lifesaver" program as a foundation for a statewide effort to reduce accidents at railroad/highway grade crossings in Pennsylvania. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-82-4)

BURNETT, Acting Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in this recommendation.

  
By: Jim Burnett  
Acting Chairman

2/ Railroad/Highway Accident Report—"Collision of Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad Company Freight Train with an Automobile, Des Moines, Iowa, July 1, 1976" (NTSB-RHR-77-2); and "Operation Lifesaver—A Program to Reduce Accidents and Deaths at Railroad-Highway Crossings," Traffic Safety, Vol. 79, No. 8, August 1979.